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ABSTRACT

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EVALUATION OF THE HUMANITIES CURRICULUM PROJECT:

A WHOLISTIC APPROACH

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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by

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This paper is in the nature of an interim report on an evaluation exercise which has run half its course. It attempts to outline the characteristics of the curriculum intervention which is being evaluated, the impact of that intervention upon the educational system, and the attempt to design an appropriate evaluation. If this account of the evaluation is sometimes cryptic and impressionistic, I hope it is because I have tried to convey in a limited time both the nature of its empirical roots and the span of its concerns.

The Humanities Curriculum Research and Development Project was set up in 1967 as part of the preparation for the raising of the school-leaving age, which, in 1972 when the Project ends, will be raised from 15 to 16 years of age for all students. The Project is jointly financed by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent trust fund, and the Schools Council, a committee, mainly of teachers, administering research funds provided partly from national government sources and partly from local government education budgets. The evaluation unit, which is accountable to the Project Director, has a four-year life from 1968 to 1972, and is financed solely by the Schools Council. The total budget for the Project and the evaluation is approximately a quarter of a million pounds.

The central team was asked to provide stimulus, support and materials for teachers and schools teaching the humanities to adolescent students aged 14 to 16. In order to give focus to its research, the central team defined humanities as the study of important human issues. They decided to concentrate on the special problems of work in controversial areas and to give support and produce materials to enable the teacher to meet

/these problems.

these problems. Following up policy statements made by educationalists and official reports, they saw humanities teaching as a possible response to the demand that the curriculum offered to adolescents should be relevant and that schools should face controversial issues with these students in an honest and adult way. The problem, as they saw it, was how to allow adolescents to reach views responsibly without being restricted by the teacher's bias or subjected to undue pressures by their fellows. They approached this problem by attempting to stimulate and study a pattern of small group discussion in which collections of evidence, printed prose, verse, drama, photographs, paintings and tapes, were used in a discussion situation which placed both teachers and pupils under the discipline of evidence. They produced collections of materials in such areas as war, education, relations between the sexes, the family, poverty, people and work, race, living in cities and law and order. The role of the central team has been to put forward initial hypotheses about teaching strategies in a discussion situation where the teacher acts as a neutral chairman and a resource consultant. During the years 1968 to 1970, the first collections were used experimentally in thirty-six schools throughout England and Wales. Teachers in those schools were asked to test the suggested rules for discussion to help to shape the work in research and in the creative activities that needed to be built up around the discussion, which was envisaged as a core activity in an open-ended enquiry curriculum.

From Easter 1970, revised packs began to be published commercially and training schemes for teachers were set up throughout the country to meet the response from individual schools and local education authorities. During the current academic year some four to five hundred schools are using the materials, which are available on the open market.

In August 1968, I was hired by the Schools Council to study this human issues project during its two-year trial period and to design an evaluation of it for implementation in 1970 to 1972 when the Project would be in nationwide dissemination. The Project Director had asked for an independent evaluation and I was given a free hand. During the past year I have been joined by three colleagues and the four of us are currently engaged in carrying out the evaluation programme.

/In conceptualisation the Project

In conceptualisation the Project had three striking characteristics:

1. It was attempting to operationalise an attitude towards curriculum which stressed teacher responsibility and judgement, as against an attitude which sees the development team as educational leaders who dispense expertise from a position of authority. By seeking at most a relationship of equality with participating system personnel, and emphasising the research role of those involved, the central team invited teachers to become technologists of curriculum rather than technicians.
2. In adopting 'understanding' as the aim of the programme the central team expressed a faith in educational rather than social adjustment approaches to controversial issues, a key problem in the development of a secondary school tradition in Britain. Some core values embodied as research hypotheses in the programme seemed dissonant with established school practice, particularly with respect to teacher and pupil roles.
3. The theoretical design of the Project started with a specification of content, followed by the formulation of an aim. The aim was then analysed into principles of procedure or process criteria, and an experiment mounted to try to realise in the classroom a pedagogically effective 'form' which would embody these criteria. It was therefore highly dependent on the teacher's understanding of philosophic and pedagogic principles for intelligent classroom practice.

Although the central team's general position in these areas was reasonably clear at the design stage, it was not until its policies became operationalised in the school system during the 1968 to 1970 experiment that the implications and consequences could be appreciated, and the related technical problems articulated.

I was appointed on the eve of the experiment to evaluate an innovation which, at first glance, bore many of the earmarks of past failures in the field. It required induction courses for teachers, it was difficult to use, it was costly in terms of school resources, it conflicted with established values. In short, the Project showed distinct promise as a case-study in the pathology of innovation, from symptoms to post-mortem.

Such a perspective did not survive its agronomic assumptions about criteria of success and failure. It soon became obvious that to base such criteria exclusively or even predominantly on short-

term pupil learnings is inappropriate where the programme under consideration constitutes a radical intervention in the whole organisational structure of a school system.

At that early stage of weighing up possible approaches to evaluation, three considerations seemed paramount.

1. The sponsor of the evaluation was a government agency with responsibility for national curriculum development, but with little experience in this role. There was therefore a need for information that would aid planning at this level. This suggested that one focus for evaluation might be upon the patterns of interaction within the system initiated or illuminated by project inputs.
2. Because the central team decided to share decision-making with participating schools, and because the mediational influence of different educational milieux seemed likely to prove to be a significant variable, considerable divergence in institutional response was anticipated. Field studies of the Project in a variety of operational contexts would be called for.
3. The climate of educational theory in Britain strongly favoured the behavioural objectives model of curriculum development and evaluation. Little thought had been given to alternative models, and I was quite unaware then of recent American debate in this area. My aim was simply to describe the work of the Project in a form which would make it accessible to public and professional judgement. Evaluation design, strategies and tactics would, hopefully, evolve in response to the impact of the Project on the system and the structure of the evaluation problems which that impact would throw up.

The Project in the Experimental Schools: 1968/70

The 36 schools which mounted the experiment in the autumn of 1968 were not selected by sampling methods. They were nominated by their administering authorities, and reflected by their variety interesting differences in judgement and priorities among the local education authorities. The participating teachers got together with the central team during the summer at regional conferences where the nature and design of the experiment was explained to them and their task outlined. By all accounts most of them went away from these conferences with some enthusiasm for the task.

/These experimental schools

These experimental schools embraced a wide range of environmental, compositional, structural and cultural variables. This contextual diversity was compounded by differences in the decisions they made about how to introduce, organise and implement the experiment, and further complicated by differences among participating personnel of motivation, commitment, understanding and expectations. Yet another variable was the extent and nature of support of the local authority.

The immediate impact of the Project was on the whole alarming. There was enormous confusion and misunderstanding, leading to a general failure to respond appropriately. There were many unanticipated problems and widespread misperception of the demands that the Project was making. Some elements in this were:

1. The importance of headmasters in innovation was underestimated by the central team, particularly in view of the conditions which were necessary for the implementation of the experiment, the support structure which such difficult and novel work seemed to call for, and its implications for the school's authority structure. The Project was seen to be manipulating major variables in the school, including established patterns of social control, a concern very real to those who work in schools. The Project did not see initially the demands it was making on rather inflexible administrative institutions. It was not easy for schools to create the necessary conditions for the experiment.
2. The teachers did not anticipate the extent to which many students had developed a trained incapacity for this work, nor the depth of alienation from any kind of curriculum offering which many students felt, nor the degree to which they themselves and their students had been successfully socialised into a tradition of teacher dominance and custodial attitudes. Many became locked in role conflicts, others in attempts to bridge an unforeseen credibility gap between themselves and their students.
3. It emerged that the central team had failed at the outset to communicate successfully the nature of the enterprise. From the teacher's point of view the ethos of the Project was evangelical rather than exploratory, and the suggested teaching strategies tests of teacher proficiency rather than research hypotheses. Many felt on trial. This both reduced their capacity to profit from the experience and adversely affected their feedback to the Centre.

/Had the picture that emerged

Had the picture that emerged from the schools been as uniform as these points might suggest, perhaps the evaluation would have developed differently. But it was not. Although the programme proved generally to be demanding, difficult and disturbing, there were striking exceptions and many contradictions in reported or observed phenomena. 'Limited' explanations of perceived failure/success, such as pupil ability, teacher behaviour, or institutional ethos, could not be readily generalised. The matter seemed increasingly complex.

During the first year, while the central team grappled with the problems of the schools in an effort to operationalise the experiment in a form which would allow them to relate pupil response to controlled teacher behaviour, the evaluator concentrated on trying to establish precisely what was happening in the schools, and on gathering information that might help to explain differing patterns of action and response. I studied the behaviour of the central team and the interaction between them, the local authorities, and the schools, gathered data for each school about the external forces of support and opposition that were mobilised by the Project's intervention, got out a checklist of hard and soft data items which added up to an institutional profile of each school, tried to assess, by questionnaires administered at conferences, the participating teachers' understanding of Project theory and attitudes towards it, and got the teachers to send in audiotapes of their classroom discussions together with written supplementary data. The needs of the central team and of the evaluation overlapped sufficiently to form a continuing basis of cooperation, even if the demands of their support role made it increasingly difficult to match priorities.

I embarked on a series of visits to the schools, intending initially to study all of them at first hand. After visiting about half of them this plan was abandoned in favour of case-studying a small number, principally because I could not understand the causes of the behaviour which I had observed in discussion groups. Why were the differences between schools in this respect so much greater than the differences within schools? Why was one group of pupils enthusiastic about the work, and a similar group in another school so hostile? Other questions accumulated as one began to seek contextual clues. Why were some staff groups supportive of

the Project, others indifferent, still others openly hostile? Why did some schools react in dissimilar ways to apparently similar problems? A host of questions like these arose as the diversity of institutional, teacher and pupil response unfolded.

Towards the end of the first year, and throughout the second year of the experiment, eight schools were studied closely. It is not possible here to give an account of these studies, but I can list some of the propositions arising out of them that the evaluation intends to explore.

1. Human action in educational institutions differs widely because of the number of variable influences that determine it. This is obvious, yet in curriculum evaluation it is sometimes assumed that what was intended to happen is what actually happens and that what happens varies little from setting to setting.
2. The impact of an innovation is not a set of discrete effects, but an organically related pattern of acts and consequences. To understand fully a single act one must locate it functionally within that pattern. It follows from this proposition that curriculum interventions have many more unanticipated consequences than is normally assumed in development and evaluation designs.
3. No two schools are sufficiently alike in their circumstances that prescriptions of curricular action can adequately supplant the judgement of the people in them. Historical/evolutionary differences alone made the innovation 'gap' a variable which has significance for decision-making.
4. The goals and purposes of the programme developers are not necessarily shared by its users. We have seen the Project used variously as a political resource in an existing power struggle, as a way of increasing the effectiveness of a custodial pattern of pupil control, and as a means of garnishing the image of institutions which covet the wrappings, but not the merchandise, of innovation.

Further considerations in the development of the evaluation design

1. Audiences

Faced with a central team who were opposed to the use of 'objectives', I had to look elsewhere for a concept of evaluation to guide me. In any case, as I became aware of the complexity and diversity of what was going on in the

experimental schools, I became increasingly sceptical of the notion of confining evaluation to the measurement of intention achievement.

I then explored the possibility of defining my responsibilities in relation to likely readers of my report. The idea of evaluation for consumers attracted me. In time 'consumers' became redefined as decision-makers and four main groups of decision-makers emerged - the sponsors, the local education authority, the schools, and the examination boards. The task of evaluation was then defined as that of answering the questions that decision-makers ask.

This task definition was subsequently perceived as unsatisfactory principally because it assumed that these people knew in advance what questions were appropriate. At the present moment we see our task as that of feeding the judgement of decision-makers by promoting understanding of the considerations that bear upon curricular action. Our orientation here is towards educing an empirical rather than a normative model of educational decision-making and its consequences.

2. Data

Decision-making groups differ in their data requirements. Individuals differ in the degree of confidence they place in different kinds of data, and in the levels of confidence at which they are prepared to act. The evaluation is taking account of this by trying to integrate both subjective and objective approaches (to use a convenient if misleading dichotomy), in a very broad study of the Project from 1970 to 1972.

3. Focus

Much evaluation work in the past has been simplistic in its assumptions, or so subservient to canons of experimental psychology that its attention has been too narrowly focused. Education is a complex practical activity. Any effort to reduce that complexity to singularistic perspectives tends to distort the reality, and may mislead those who seek to understand the reality. Least of all does it help those who live there. Perhaps at this stage of our understanding bolder evaluation designs can give us some more adequate view of what it is we are trying to change, and of what is involved in changing it. It is this belief that lies behind a wholistic approach to evaluation.

A systematic attempt will be made to document the outcomes of the Project at the levels of system, institution, teacher and pupil, to locate those outcomes within a record of antecedent events and conditions, and to explain variations in outcome in terms which will lead to more informed curriculum decisions. This is an ambitious aim in such a complex area and represents for us an aspiration rather than an achievable goal.

Evaluation Design

- a) In a large sample of schools (c. 100)
 - (i) Gathering input, contextual and implementation data by questionnaire.
 - (ii) Gathering experiential impressionistic and judgemental data from teachers and pupils.
 - (iii) Objective measurement of pupil and teacher change. (We have at the beginning of this year carried out pre-tests of pupils on 21 objective instruments which represent the combined judgements of teachers, pupils, the central team and ourselves, of likely dimensions of pupil change).
 - (iv) Tracing process variation by multiple choice feedback instruments which require minimal effort by the teacher and are monitored by pupils.
 - (v) Monitoring institutional response by semi-structured diary instruments.
- b) In a small sample of schools (c.12)
 - (i) Case studies of patterns of decision-making, communication, training and support in local areas.
 - (ii) Case studies of individual schools within these areas.
 - (iii) Study of process dynamics by audiotape, videotape, and observation.

To sum up, we now have the job of describing the experience of hundreds of schools embarking on work with Project materials, and, moreover, describing that experience in ways which will be helpful to those who have to make judgements in this field. In an open-ended enquiry programme of this kind where the aims are broadly defined and where teacher behaviour is a matter of individual response to particular situations in the light of these aims, this

/is no simple matter.

is no simple matter. We see the need for both qualitative field studies and quantitative data gathering and measurement techniques to be combined in a broad front approach to the evaluation. It is hoped, by interweaving these studies, to advance understanding of the interplay of forces in this curriculum innovation.

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